

WILDLIFE HABITAT LAND PROJECT PROPOSAL

WILLOW CREEK ADDITION to MT HAGGIN WMA

1. **Region:** 3 **Regional Supervisor:** Marina Yoshioka
Name of Applicant: Vanna Boccadori

2. **Date:** 27 May 2021

3. **Project Name:** Willow Creek Addition to Mt Haggin WMA
Type of Project: Fee Title

4. **Size:** 829 acres, private ownership

5. **Location:** Region 3 in Deer Lodge County, 4 miles south of Anaconda, MT, adjacent to the northern boundary of Mt Haggin WMA:
S30, T04 N, R10 W, ACRES 528.28, ALL LESS E2E2E2
S19, T04 N, R10 W, ACRES 300.87, W2

Map(s): all maps and photos are located at the end of this document.

6. **Project Need (Limit to 1,500 characters) – up to 10 pts.** The Willow Creek Addition to Mt Haggin WMA fits with Commission policy for purchasing interest in wildlife habitats in the following ways:
 - a. It shares 2.5 miles of boundary with Mt. Haggin WMA and therefore will extend the ecological benefits and habitat effectiveness of land managed for wildlife habitat and landscape connectivity.
 - b. It will conserve 829 acres of open grasslands, sagebrush and bitterbrush foothills, forest lands and riparian habitats for a suite of game and nongame species, such as elk, mule deer, pronghorn, moose, ruffed grouse, sandhill cranes, beaver, mink, short-tailed weasels, raptors, neotropical songbirds and several small mammal species.
 - c. The Property provides mule deer and elk winter range and pronghorn fawning and summer range.
 - d. The Property is bordered to the north with a subdivision. Given current interest in Montana real estate, this property is at risk of being subdivided. The current landowners have recently been approached by developers showing interest in acquiring their property.
 - e. It will protect approximately 3 miles of perennial and intermittent streams. Mill Creek crosses the northwest corner of the Property and Willow Creek flows across approximately 1 mile of the southern end. Both Mill and Willow Creeks were sampled extensively with eDNA for Bull Trout; analysis is pending. Genetics data has confirmed that pure strain westslope cutthroat trout occur in both bodies of water.
 - f. It will create new and improved public access to an estimated 5,575 acres for recreational activities such as hunting, fishing, trapping, birdwatching and hiking.

7. **Statewide Habitat Criteria – up to 10 pts.**
 - a) Community Types (SWAP 2015) comprising the property and their approximate percentage makeup.

Tier 1 Community Types of Greatest Conservation Need	% Make-up
Montane Grassland	60
Sagebrush Steppe	24
Floodplain and Riparian	3
Deciduous Shrubland	2
Deciduous dominated forest and woodland	<1
Mountain Streams	<1
Tier 2 Community Types	% Make-up
Conifer-dominated forest and woodland (xeric-mesic)	10

- b) Estimated length of live stream – 1 mile
Wetland/riparian/floodplain acres – 25 acres
- c) Percentage of tillage cropland relative to the entire property acreage – 0%

8. Project-Level Criteria

Photos: all maps and photos are located at the end of this document.

- a) **Site-Specific Wildlife Values – up to 10 pts.** The Willow Creek Addition to Mt Haggin WMA provides important habitat to several big game species. It provides critical winter range for mule deer because of the bitterbrush and aspen stands located on the Property. While the bitterbrush stands are heavily used by mule deer, occasionally elk partake of the shrub as well (Figure 3). The Property supports 40-60 mule deer (25% of the Hunting District 341 population). As many as 300 elk utilize the Property during winter as well as during spring transition as they make their way toward summer range on Mt Haggin WMA. The vast montane grassland provides fawning and summer range for 20-30 pronghorn that migrate over 20 miles from their Fleecer winter range.
- b) **Threat Status: IMMINENT - 10 pts:**
The Willow Creek Addition to Mt Haggin WMA property has imminent threat for development/subdivision because of its location, amenities, ease of access, and current interest in Montana real estate. The Property can be viewed and accessed from surrounding public lands and MT State Highway 569. It is near the communities of Butte and Anaconda and the amenities they provide. It borders the Mt Haggin WMA to the south and the east. It also borders private land to the east that is protected by a Conservation Easement held by FWP since 1996. There is a 5,000+ acre subdivision directly west of the Property (Figure 5). The landowners have already been contacted by developers. If this property is subdivided it will cause irreversible impacts to this land, the WMA and its wildlife and open space values.
- c) **Focal Priority – up to 10 pts.**

Does the proposal occur within a 2015 SWAP Tier I Focus Area? YES. It occurs within Focal Area 30.

d) Geographic Effectiveness – up to 10 pts.

Willow Creek Addition is 830 contiguous acres. It borders Mt Haggin WMA on the west and south. It borders the Ueland Ranch on the east that is protected under a conservation easement held by FWP since 1996. Acquisition of this property would have a synergistic effect for wildlife conservation and management given its location adjacent to these protected properties.

Acquisition of the Property would also be strategic for Fisheries. Lower Willow Creek is known to be an important spawning area for brown trout from the Clark Fork River. Impacts in the upper watershed such as sediment from roads and other developments entering the creek, erosion, and loss of riparian habitat associated with agricultural practices could be detrimental to spawning habitat quality lower downstream. While most of upper Willow Creek is located on Mt Haggin WMA and therefore protected, the stretch across the Property is the remaining piece that is not currently protected. Conservation of the Property's waterways and riparian habitats will support healthy fisheries throughout the system, while also providing anglers more access to Montana's fine trout-fishing streams.

e) Contribute to hunting and fishing opportunity and other recreation – up to 10 pts.

The Willow Creek Addition to Mt Haggin WMA is expected to create new and improved public access to an estimated 5,575 acres (Figure 6). A mile of Willow Creek will be opened to angling, along with a short stretch of Mill Creek. There are two existing legal access routes to the Property – from MT State Highway 569 and a Deer Lodge County road. Given the proximity to Anaconda and Butte, it is expected that the Property will experience over 300 days of hunting, fishing, trapping, hiking, photography, wildlife-watching and other recreational opportunities.

f) Management Considerations – 10 pts.

The following are management considerations should FWP acquire the Willow Creek Addition to Mt Haggin WMA:

- Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF) intends to acquire the Willow Creek Addition and convey it to FWP for perpetual ownership and inclusion in Mt Haggin WMA, if approved by the Fish & Wildlife Commission and the MT State Land Board. RMEF and the landowners are currently negotiating a purchase option. Toward this end, RMEF recently received a \$158,000 grant from the MT Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust (MFWCT) for this purchase.
- Assuming FWP support of this project, RMEF is developing the project as a phased acquisition with a portion of the Property proposed to be purchased by RMEF before December 31, 2021 using MSFWT and other funds. The remainder of the Property is slated to be purchased by December 31, 2022 using funds from FWP and other sources.
- Total project cost is estimated at \$2,500,000.
- There are improvements on the Property that are also being evaluated for removal (house and metal barn). There are two residences, two garages, and a large metal barn. The owners have offered to move the buildings at their own expense but that activity may go well into the year 2022 after FWP purchases the property. The owners also discussed and are considering donating the buildings to the

Department. It may be to FWP's benefit to purchase the land and the improvements in the event there are state uses for the improvements and/or sell them through auction and have them removed by the successful purchaser. RMEF could also be of assistance selling the buildings and have them removed.

- FWP Realty Specialist Martin Balukas researched any possible contamination concerns on the Property. No major concerns were found.
- The Property would be managed as part of Mt Haggin WMA. No additional FTE would be required. There is a significant infestation of spotted knapweed and leafy spurge on the property. This will be managed under "*Mt Haggin/Fleecer WMA Noxious Weed Baseline Report and 10-Year Management Plan*" (FWP 2019). Start-up tasks such as signing boundaries, fence removal, etc will be handled through a volunteer work party with local conservation groups, FWP personnel, and other interested parties.
- Public access will be non-motorized with seasonal closures Dec 2 – May 15 to protect wintering wildlife.
- The Property is not currently grazed. FWP does not intend to graze the property if acquired.

Figure 1: Overview of Willow Creek Addition location relative to surrounding FWP wildlife management areas, conservation easement and Anaconda, MT.

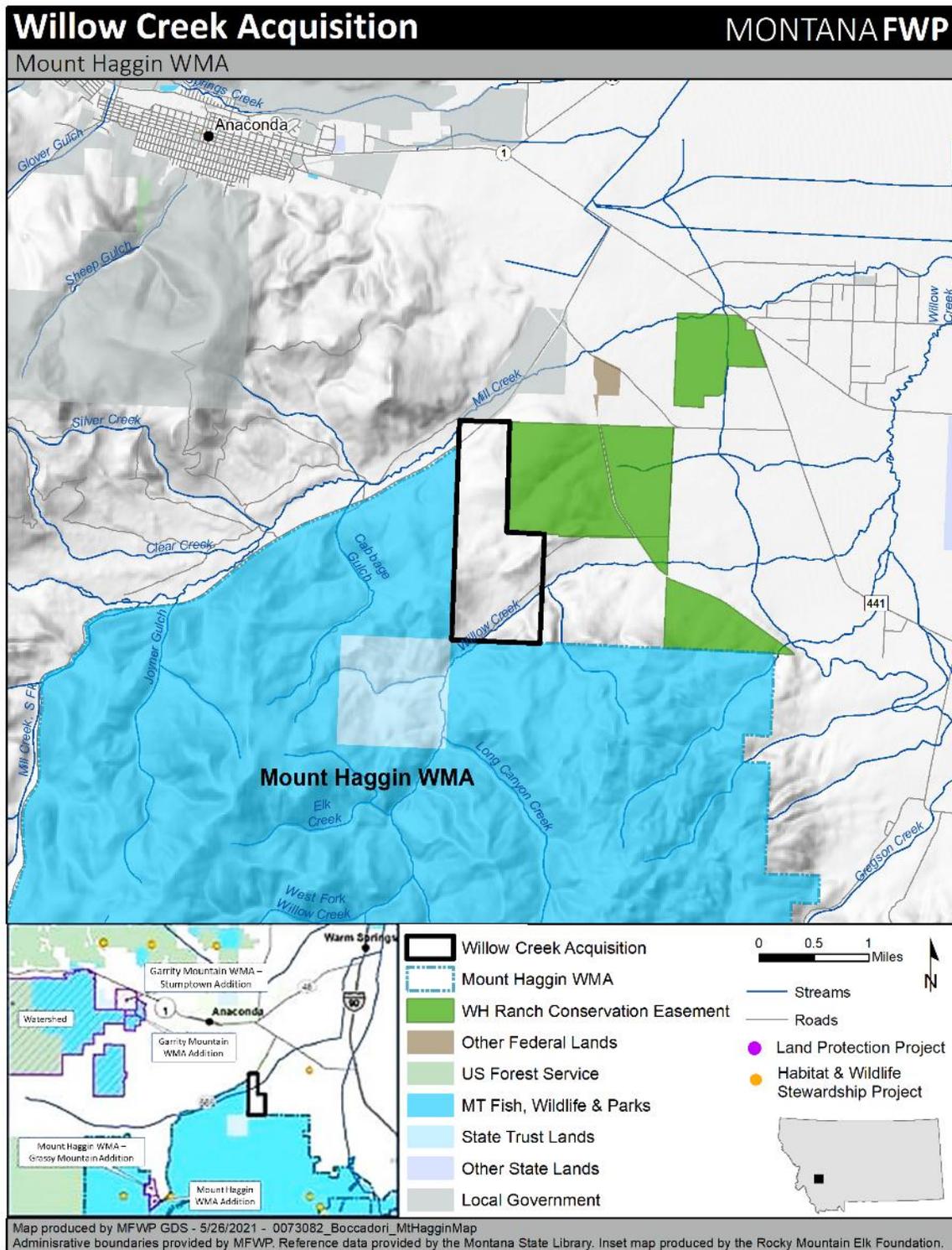


Figure 2: Hydrologic location of the Willow Creek Addition to Mt. Haggin WMA within the Upper Clark Fork watershed. The project contains approximately 3 miles of perennial and intermittent streams, including Willow Creek and Mill Creek.

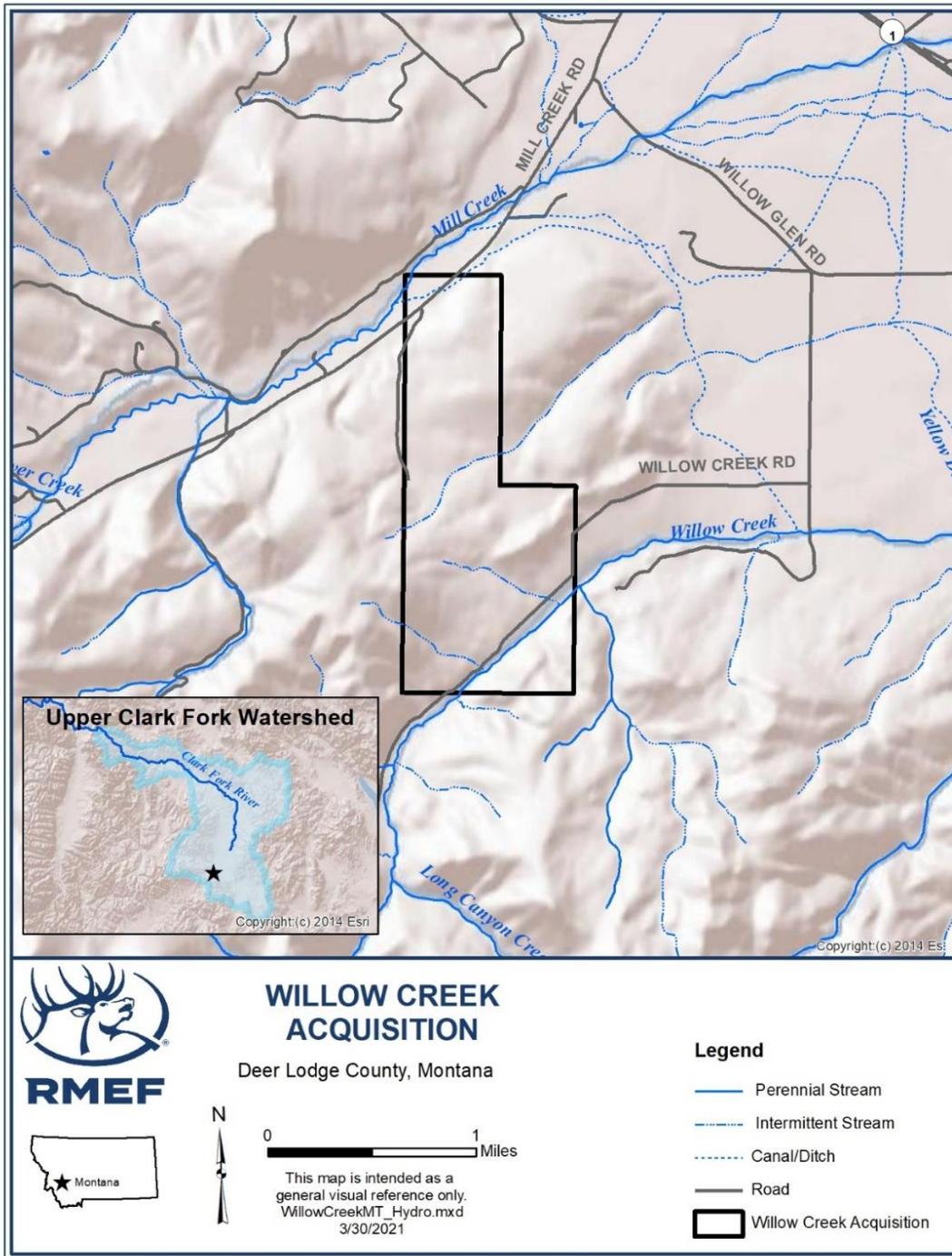


Figure 3. Elk and mule deer sharing bitterbrush on Deciduous Shrubland habitat on the Property.



Figure 4. View of the vast Montane Grassland habitat on the Property.



Figure 5. Location of Willow Creek Addition (outlined in red) in relation to a 5000+ acre subdivision (outlined in yellow) that borders it and Mt Haggin WMA (brown hash). Not highlighted is private land adjacent to the Property on the east that is protected by a conservation easement held by FWP since 1996.

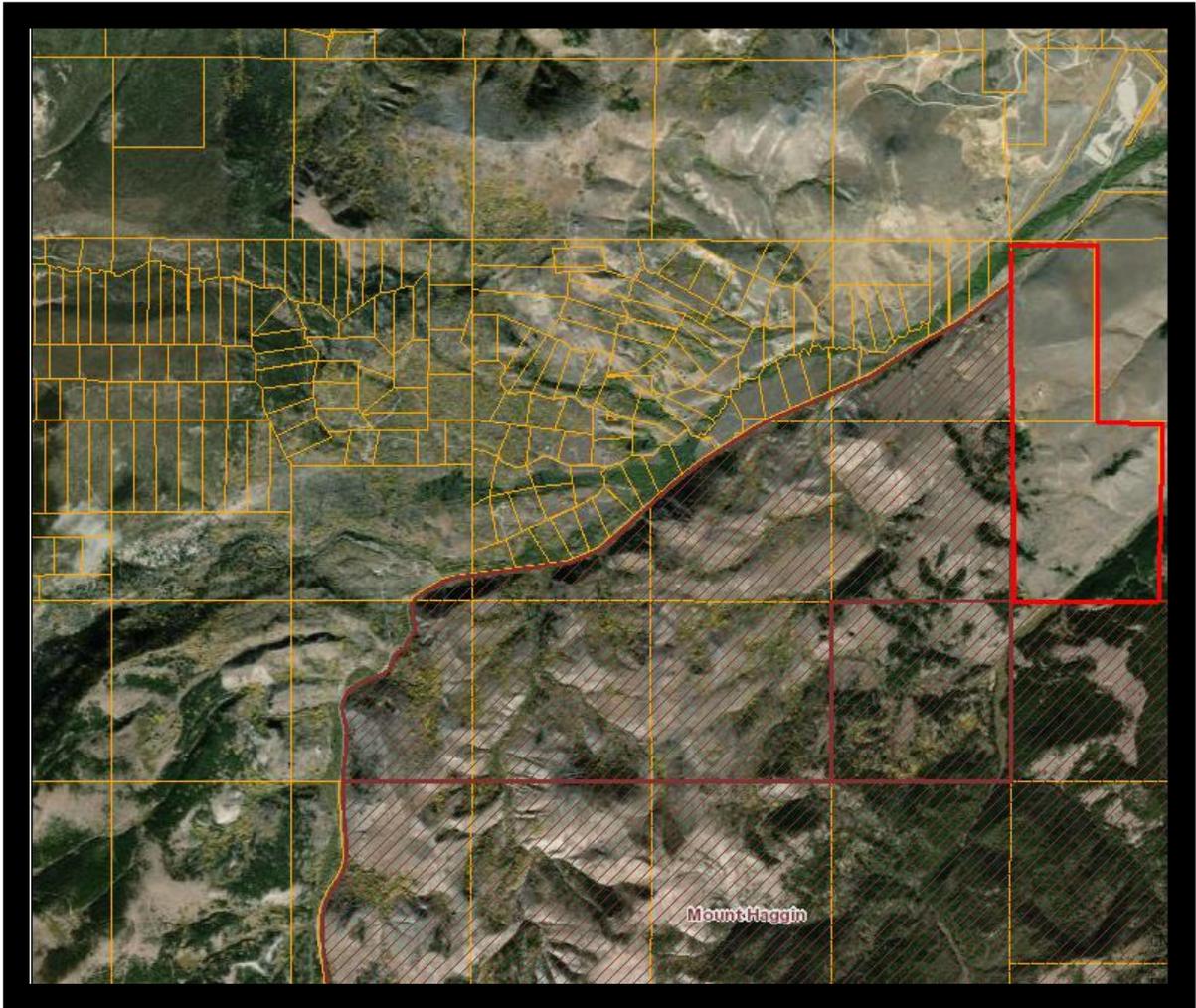


Figure 6. Increased new and improved public access that is expected to occur with the acquisition of the Willow Creek Addition to Mt Haggin WMA.

